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Beneath the violent Sunni-on-Shi'ite, Shi'ite-on-Sunni headlines, Iraq's sectarian violence has devastated the country's 2,000-year-old Christian community and its religious minorities generally. A tragedy of historic proportions is unfolding.

It is estimated that half of all non-Muslim religious minorities still living in Iraq are internally displaced, in addition to the more than 700,000 who have already fled the country since the war began in March 2003. These minorities comprise three or four percent of the total population of Iraq, but they are around 40 percent of Iraqi refugees, who are thought to number 1.8 million in total. Iraq's religious minorities are Chaldean, Eastern-rite Catholic, Orthodox, Assyrian, Syriac, Mandean, Yizidi, Bahai, Kaka'i and a small number of Jews, among others. Some of these groups are specific to Iraq; all trace roots of hundreds or thousands of years there. The diverse Iraqi religious heritage which they helped create is now in serious decline and may well be irreparable.

As detailed in today's Editorial section by Felice D. Gaer and Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of the **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom**, a U.S. government agency which functions as religious-freedom watchdog, there are potentially useful policy options which haven't been tried yet. But first the relevant players must awake to the problem.

The State Department does not consider Iraq a "country of particular concern" for religious liberty. It should. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) "has not even acted to assess [Chaldo-Assyrian] claims of religious persecution," Nina Shea, one of Washington's most tireless defenders of religious freedom, told a House International Relations subcommittee yesterday. The Iraqi government is much worse. At least two top leaders including the speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, Mahmoud al-Mashhadani, have been quoted urging insurgents to kidnap and kill Christian women instead of Muslims. This has to end -- as does the reported marginalization of religious minorities who have fled to the Kurdish north.

Leading the untried policies is direct access to the U.S. Refugee Program for Iraq's religious minorities, which is not yet available. A close second is ending the foot-dragging by the UNHCR

on Iraqi refugees. The agency "has not conducted refugee status determinations for Iraqis," the authors write opposite here. "This means that Iraqis fleeing persecution in their home country are being denied international protections to which they are entitled as legitimate refugees." Also worth exploring is how the United States can prevent Kurdish militias and government authorities from denying religious minorities who have fled north a share of U.S. aid, including water and electrical projects, schools and medical facilities. This is intolerable and must stop.

The stories emerging from these communities are ugly. "Since July 2006 alone, seven clergymen have been kidnapped and two of them, both from Mosul, murdered," Mrs. Shea reported yesterday.

The conceptual approach Mrs. Shea favors is to welcome Iraq's religious minorities to the United States much as Soviet Jews in the Cold War were granted special refugee status. This makes a great degree of sense. An increasingly large number of these minorities cannot live in Iraq anymore. They are targeted as infidels and killed in cold blood. The United States is capable of welcoming them and is morally obligated to do so.